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HD **Will B.C.'s new cabinet park partisanship at the door? The appointment of the Environment cabinet seat and the creation of a Mental Health and Addictions seat sends the right message to the Greens, writes Lori Turnbull. But where is the dedicated minister of democratic reform?**

BY Lori Turnbull

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Lori Turnbull is an associate professor of political science at Dalhousie University.

The swearing in of the NDP government in British Columbia could be a significant event in the evolution of parliamentary democracy in the province if the government, and the Greens who have pledged to support it, follow through on vows to park partisanship in favour of a more collaborative style of governing.

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The Greens do not have representation around the cabinet table and so are not a part of the government, but they have agreed not to vote non-confidence in the NDP during the duration of the agreement. (In turn, Premier John Horgan has agreed not to call an early election, which minority premiers and prime ministers have done in the past when survey data start to indicate that they are in majority territory.)

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The composition of the NDP cabinet announced Tuesday could be said to reflect the terms of the relationship. The parties have agreed to an ambitious environmental and climate action agenda that includes preventing the expansion of the Kinder Morgan pipeline. The appointment of George Heyman as Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy has already garnered cheers from the stakeholder community. He is a well-known, respected and experienced leader on environmental issues, having served as the executive director of the Sierra Club, and will be the strong voice the government needs on the Kinder Morgan file that places the province at odds with the federal government.

The creation of a dedicated Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions was a condition of the Green Party's support for the NDP government. The appointment sends the right signals that the government intends to be immediately responsive on this issue, specifically the overdose crisis, though some have raised concerns that this machinery change could actually complicate the delivery of mental health services, at least for a while, because they will have to be separated out from the current Ministry of Health. Though the NDP government and the Green Party have agreed to an ambitious democratic reform agenda that includes a referendum on proportional representation, new electoral finance legislation and a comprehensive review and reform of lobbying, it is surprising that there is no dedicated minister of democratic reform, and no parliamentary secretary responsible for carrying the file, either.

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The 10-page confidence and supply agreement, signed by the two party leaders, might not make its way to everyone's summer reading list, but it represents a noteworthy and refreshing interpretation of some aspects of parliamentary governance and the constitutional conventions that support it. For example, the agreement states explicitly that government bills will not always or automatically be treated as matters of confidence. In fact, not even the budget bill itself will be treated as a confidence vote, though the overall budgetary policy of the government has been deemed a matter of confidence. We will have to stay tuned to see how this differentiation plays out in practice, but the agreement is clear that the Greens are not expected to support the government on every bill and that those that are not matters of confidence will be decided on an issue by issue basis.

This alone is a very healthy step forward in the development of parliamentary governance in Canada. It has become part of our culture to treat virtually everything as a matter of confidence and, in connection, to expect parties to vote as blocs on every bill that comes before the House. A government caucus has a strong incentive to vote as a bloc on confidence measures to ensure that the government survives, but opposition parties tend to vote as blocs every bit as much as government caucuses do, even when the government holds a majority of seats and defeating it is not really an option. We rarely see members of a caucus vote differently from one another, even on bills that are not central to the party's agenda. This is unnecessary stifling of backbenchers in both the government and the opposition caucuses who are looking for opportunities to exercise their own judgment and to voice constituents' concerns.

Hopefully, the explicit acknowledgment that bills will be treated on an issue-by-issue basis will cause a shift away from an unproductive cultural tendency, and the four-year confidence and supply agreement will provide the freedom for members to consider each bill on its merits without fear of defeating the government.

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